

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” You may be seated.

Good morning sisters and brothers. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today.

When we look carefully at today’s Gospel reading from Luke, we might ask the question – WHY were the people in the synagogue in Galilee so pleased with what Jesus had to say? Luke tells us that Jesus was welcomed and praised by everyone. After he read from the scroll and proclaimed that he would be the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” (You’ll find this reaction in verse 22 which comes right after the last line of our reading today.) Why was the crowd in the synagogue pleased? Because they had been longing for Isaiah’s prediction to come true for a long time!

The Jewish people living in Palestine in the first century CE were suffering. They were oppressed. First, they lived under Roman occupation. Secondly, the majority were peasants who had to struggle to obtain the necessities of everyday life. These tenant farmers, laborers, and

slaves lived at a subsistence level – constantly in danger of hunger or starvation. Plus, they bore the burden of paying high taxes to Rome.

The society in Palestine was such that most of the wealth was concentrated in the hands of the elites – a small group of people who owned land and had social status. Although the elites formed only a tiny percentage of the population, they had extraordinary economic and political power. They ruled over the peasants harshly.

Jesus' audience in the synagogue was hungry for freedom. They longed to be released from poverty and hardship. They wanted "good news." Jesus' words gave them hope, promising that they would no longer be held down but instead would be empowered. Jesus told them that he had come to usher them into a new life of liberty and dignity. They were delighted with his promises.

Wonderful! Alleluia! But, Jesus' message is more complex than it appears on the surface. I was reminded of this when I read verses 18 and 19 out loud. I said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Yes – ME. "He has anointed ME to bring good news to the poor." Jesus asked his audience not only to receive the good news but to proclaim it to the world. It wasn't enough just to hear it and be glad. Jesus directed the people of his day to announce the vision God gave Isaiah by living it.

Jesus asked those in the synagogue, and he is asking us now, to befriend the poor; to loosen the bonds of those held captive; to help heal those who have been crushed or victimized; to lead people out of darkness; and to assure others of God's love and grace.

The Jewish people weren't the only ones who needed Jesus' promises. Our world today is very troubled. People all around us are poor, sick, suffering violence or neglect, imprisoned, or trapped in addictions or homelessness. There is so much blindness and hatred. Our culture often leaves us feeling empty and disappointed. We also need the salvation that Jesus promises.

As Christians, we must understand that rejoicing in the good news involves helping to bring Jesus' promises to fruition. We are called to be the Body of Christ in our world, walking with the lonely, rejected, and marginalized. We (you and I) are Jesus' hands and feet in this time and place.

Have you ever noticed in our Eucharistic Prayer that Fr. Manny and Mother Marcia say the following words, "Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only and not for strength"? Have you ever wondered what that means? I think it is meant to remind us that God feeds

us so we will have the strength to do God's work in the world. When we receive the comfort, we must also acknowledge the call.

When I think about bringing light into the darkness of our world, I think about those who try and stop the rising tide of violence that we face in this country. Have you ever heard of the Safe Streets community violence prevention program that has been operating in Baltimore City for fourteen years? For me, this program is a good example of proclaiming release to those who are trapped in the cycle of poverty, crime, and violence.

Safe Streets "violence interrupters" in ten Baltimore neighborhoods mediate conflicts that could easily result in gunfire. These interrupters are mostly men who spent time in prison, came out determined not to go back and took jobs to lead their peers away from street life or at least stop them from killing or dying. They stroll residential streets, especially areas known for drug dealing, listening to people and building relationships. They know who to call when they come across someone who needs assistance with anything from food to housing to drug treatment.

Baltimore's Safe Streets program has reduced homicides and fatal shootings in the neighborhood zones where workers are active. But, just last Wednesday a Safe Streets worker was killed in a quadruple shooting in

East Baltimore. This is not the first time that a Safe Streets interrupter has been killed. Bringing light into dark places is a risky undertaking.

I won't ever be a Safe Streets worker, but I can find other ways to serve that will bring the good news to those who truly need it. You and I know that God's promises are being fulfilled. We can be bold and seize the opportunities we have to walk with others and ease their pain as Jesus did. Let's keep our eyes and our hearts open. And, let's pray for the courage to step up and act when it isn't easy or safe.

AMEN